

In Our Own Voices

By: Tom Scilipoti

Hi my name is Tom Scilipoti. I have several nicknames: Scils, Fish, Buddha, Tomahawk, Tommy Boy. I have two published books, a teaching certificate in the state of Maryland, a B.A in Philosophy, wonderful parents, a fantastic brother and I also have Bi-polar Disorder, Type I. It's the hope and mission of both me and the organization I'm speaking on behalf of, NAMI to de-stigmatize mental illness through education and putting a human face to it.

DARK DAYS

Every time I hear a train, I'm reminded of my fourth semester at Gettysburg College. That's because, every day without exception, I fantasized about throwing myself under one. After a summer where I felt like superman, Buddha, Mel Gibson and Jesus all rolled into one epic, ecstatic blend, I woke up in a winter nightmaredland every afternoon with a hangover from all of my suicidal thoughts. For the sake of not making the sixteen hours asleep a day doldrums and midnight black shadows of clinical depression contagious, I won't dwell on the arctic, subterranean bride of bipolar mania—too much. But I will swear under oath that I'd felt buried under the enormous pressure of damp, heavy sand with an intensity so profound that it made the North Pole of my condition look like a freshly blazed hippie.

"Oh you're bipolar, so you're crazy. Mentally Ill. Psychotic. A leper in a sea of beauty kings and princesses. You'll just live w/your parents and collect a little government cheese for the rest of your life. Over/under's 37. " Was a frequent assessment.

"You're not gonna wake up for another ten hours but the trains coming, maybe you should lay on the tracks?"

Were constant, cancerous hiccups from my second spring semester at Gettysburg that no book, medicine nor fellow human could successfully cure. A former class comedian and handsome soccer player, I was now saw myself as an incredibly unsick and equally smelly joke. Fat, drunk, and stupid. Lazy and unlovable. A real loser I was in my motionless mind, out of touch with reality. Mentally ill. Unworthy of respect, unworthy of dignity—unworthy of the remaining years in my potentially beautiful life. The fact that my youth was blissful only rubbed extra salt in my sour patches of psychological wounds. Truly, when you've experienced the highest peaks of psychological heaven, the depths of psychological hell are infinitely hotter. Everyone experiences lows but there is not a color in the entire rainbow that captures how dark the days of clinical depression really are.

ACCEPTANCE

Imagine being told at the age of 19, that you're mentally ill therefore, you're not allowed to drink, smoke and you have to take anti-psychotic medicine for the rest of your life? Not an easy pill to swallow, am I right? Pun intended. So my odyssey to acceptance wasn't a breezy one.

At first, I thought that my parents and doctors were fools—that no one is a prophet in their own village, that our society WOULD medicate one of its freest and most insightful thinkers, like they did to Winston Smith in George Orwell's 1984 because it's so ass backwards. I definitely realized that I had been manic AF in Ocean City and the month in Gettysburg that I took a complete hiatus from class but saw myself as perhaps

UNI-polar and once took a pen and labeled my head meds as “Creativity Killers”. My mom wasn’t crazy about that. But when I came down from the clouds and into the ocean trenches of suicidal depression I had suffered enough to understand that this condition was real and I’m definitely afflicted by it. Still, I was embarrassed to tell people that I was bi-polar and wasn’t completely compliant about taking my meds and not partying. But I had the good fortune of seeing a counselor at Gettysburg who enlightened me to the essence of the condition. He told me about all of the incredible artists that were also manic-depressive: Van Gogh, William Blake, Winston Churchill, Teddy Roosevelt, Mozart, even rapper DMX. And taught me to see bipolar disorder, ultimately, as a blessing, when balanced, that mainly smart, creative people are given. Once I accepted my diagnosis as a bright blessing rather than a crippling curse could I begin to truly start to recover.

RECOVERY

I see recovery, not as going from the bottom of the ocean to the top of Mount Everest and staying there for the rest of my life, but rather, as staying on my surfboard as I ride a tidal wave. Balancing every day with bipolar disorder truly takes a tremendous amount of focus, resilience and skill and I’d be a liar if I said I’ve never fallen off my board since 2005. I’ve had two major manic episodes since I had my cathartic moment as seeing Bipolar Disorder as a blessing. One was due to a medicine change and another, seemed as if it was fated, inevitable, written in the stars and therefore, inescapable. Everybody thought I’d stop taking my medicine but in reality, they just stopped working. Both episodes led to hospitalization but neither crushed my indomitable spirit, shattered my good will or kept me from getting back on my surfboard. Still, the surf is never easy. Bouts of depression still hit, I struggle to stay away from alcohol and weed, I’m 31 and still live with my parents, I’m clinically obese but I have the optimism and will to make sure that I keep surfing and land on brighter more beautiful beaches. Failure is not falling of your board, it’s refusing to get back on your board. As long as I’m afflicted by Bipolar Disorder, I will be in recovery as there’s no cure for the biochemical brain imbalance, there’s no permanent post at the top of Mount Everest. I’m sorry if these feels like a grim sentence but the guy who wanted to put a tee-pee over his frat house, who thought Dave Matthews was gonna play a concert in his basement on Christmas, who literally tried to walk on water, is ironically enough, a realist. Life will never be as easy as Lindsay Lohan but it still has tremendous potential to be rich with joy, unwavering love, belly laughter, success, serenity and satisfaction. My goal, my daily surf is to live this type of life every day that I can. Equipped with an arsenal of smart, sound coping skills, I’m confident that I will, at the very least, get back on my board every time I slip off.

COPING SKILLS

There are many ways I can describe my coping skills—or the tools I use to stay balanced and find my equilibrium when I lose it. I choose rhyming verse.

I got the coping skills to chill the mentally ill

The perspective to take a prospective curse

And transform it into blessed verse

Coping skill #1 is to evict the depressing thoughts from my brain

And convert them into words that radiate real emotions on the page

To take the mercury weighing down my mind
And transform it into stellar gems that bind
True hearts to fine, undeniable art
Two is to soak in the wisdom of the sages,
Cleanse my being in their divinely inspired pages
Whether it's JC, Buddha, Plato or Sarte
I find wisdom in timeless art that beats with a universal heart
Three is to enjoy the best high, catch an endorphin buzz,
There's never been a day with good exercise that was
Too lazy, too crazy, too mad, sick or sad
For after a real workout I'm instantly glad
I'm full of peace, satisfaction and joy
With more chill than Asia got soy
Four is surrounding myself with people I adore—
Keeping sacred satellites around my world and adding more
For a social-spiritual network built on unwavering love and reciprocity
Is not only a net of safety, bliss and generosity,
But a dream team that motivates me to win each and every day
And a lifeline that pulls me out of the riptide when my sanity starts to slip away
The last coping skill in my starting five
Springs from the well that makes me feel the most alive—
Aligning my consciousness, my will, my chi, my energy beams to my hopes, successes and dreams
Every one lives, every one dies, but an exceptional life flies
To the shores of near impossible feats fueled to achieve
The beauty of one's inner vision
With uncanny precision
And as long as Italian-American blood pumps from my heart,

I will ride the tidal wave with my eyes on the prize of mainstreaming my art

Armed with the coping skills to chill the mentally ill,

I believe it all will come true before my time is through.

HOPES, SUCCESSES AND DREAMS

I've published two books, written two feature film length screenplays, six episodes of a TV Show, earned a B.A in Philosophy from a Top 50 liberal arts college, earned a teaching certificate in the State of Maryland, managed to make and maintain phenomenal friendships in spite of a pervasive mental illness but easily my biggest success to date is not letting Bi-Polar Disorder change the person I've always been. Throughout my 30+ years I've been honest, funny, energetic, creative, bright, quirky, unique and genuine. Despite a very difficult psychiatric condition and the colossal highs, lows and inevitable bouts of insanity that come with it, I've succeeded in staying true to my core character.

I believe that the meaning of life is to live a meaningful life and my hopes and dreams are rooted in this belief. Helping to de-stigmatize mental illness through education and putting a human face to it is the reason I do these presentations and I hope to amplify my voice in this mission by mainstreaming my creative works. All of my books and screenplays to date have a common theme—seeing through superficial surface appearances into the essence of people, keeping a sense of humor in spite of tragedies and riding the wave of my fate with a sunlit smile. It's my dream to be able to convey these themes, deep and equally hilarious stories, and distinct narrative voice to the world on the big screen. Even if my Hollywood break through takes forty years or never happens, I will never stop working incessantly to make these dreams a reality. Moreover, I will never let Bi-Polar Disorder nor the inevitable legion of haters and doubters, keep me from surfing to the optimal shore that I see in my most gorgeous, oceanic dreams. Perspective is so important. I could choose to throw myself endless pity parties, limit my dreams to a comfortable 9-5 job till I'm geriatric, perceive Bi-polar Disorder as a crutch and curse. But I've chosen the perception less adopted—to see Bi-polar disorder as a blessing disguised as a death sentence, to see myself not as mentally ill, but rather, mentally chill and to dream as big as my grand imagination can envision.

Even if you do not have a mental illness, I hope you can understand the power of positivity and a progressive, life-affirming perspective. And if as little as one person in the audience now has a more informed perspective on mental illness, a little less stigma towards it, a human face to a psychiatric diagnosis, I believe that this presentation has been a great success.

Thank you,

Tom Scilipoti

